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Marketing strategies for career services

Abstract

There are many marketing strategies career centers can use. Faculty, staff, alumni, and parents are extremely important targets to which services can be marketed. If career centers gain their support, they can promote the career center to students as well. Creating a marketing plan and a brand identity is another part of the process to market students to the career center. Once the career center achieves this step, the next step is looking at certain marketing ideas that may fit their specific college goals. The use of technology is another crucial strategy that can help attract students to career centers. By sharing these ideas, other institutions may learn new strategies and resources that may help them face challenges and benefit students as well.

MARKETING STRATEGIES FOR CAREER SERVICES

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Introduction

Historically, career services centers face the problem of persuading students to use their services. In a survey of newly graduated students at a liberal arts institution in Pittsburgh, only 36 out of 275 students said they found help with their jobs through the career services office (Chesler, 1995). According to Craig Mosurinjohn, Director of Career Services at The University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, students believe they do not need career services to find opportunities even when the job market is tight (Spotlight Online, 2001). The question is, "Why aren't more students seeking help through career service offices on college campuses and what can colleges and universities do to increase students' knowledge about career services?"

According to a National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) survey, practitioners and recruiters agree that students are bypassing campus recruitment and depending on technology -- doing an Internet job search and e-mailing resumes to employers to try to land a job at the last minute. Some recruiters say this method can be a dangerous practice because students are not getting the counseling they need from the career center (Spotlight Online, 2001). Other recruiters also agree that the successful entry-level candidate who receives a credible job after their degree is most often the student who has been prepared by career centers (Spotlight Online, 2001). Some career center staff believe that there are additional reasons why students may not use career services: they may have heard from peers and some faculty that career services cannot provide help for their needs; they may not have known that career services existed; or they may have known about it, but were too busy to utilize the services (K. Brierly, personal communication, August, 14, 2001). In addition, some

students think that being in college and studying for a degree is enough to get them the job they are wanting when they graduate. In reality students lack responsibility and/or motivation, according to many employers (K. Brierly, personal communication, August 14, 2001). Many employers are also looking for some kind of internship or work experience during college (M. Rooney, personal communication, May 9, 2002). While students may know this, they are too busy studying to become involved in internships or to work.

Job Outlook Projections

It is going to be more important than ever in the future that students use career services and that career services centers market to students. Each year, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) surveys its employer members about hiring plans and other employment-related issues. According to the results on NACE's *Job Outlook 2002* e-mail survey, employers expect to hire 19.7 percent fewer new college graduates in 2001-02 than they did in 2000-01. Among employers who hired a large number of new college graduates last year (250+), that number is an even steeper drop of 23.2 percent (Spotlight Online, 2001).

On average, respondents expect their companies to hire 118 new college graduates per company this year, down from the average of 147 new college graduates they hired per company last year. Overall, employers expect to visit 12.6 percent fewer college campuses this year. Many employers who are cutting back say they need to focus on the schools that have been most productive for them in the past. Those who expect to cut back on college hiring said that economic slowdown was their main reason (Spotlight Online, 2001).

The purpose of this study is to examine how marketing concepts and strategies can be used in the area of career services in an effort to reach out to students and increase their use of career services, programs, and opportunities. Specifically, it will describe the problems career centers are facing, as well as apply strategies such as service strategy, the purpose and creation of a "brand" identity, how to understand and motivate students, marketing to parents and faculty, specific events in helping market students, and the role of technology in the career center.

Applying Concepts of Service Marketing

Successful businesses utilize marketing strategies in order to attract and keep customers, as well as to anticipate and plan for change. In much the same way, career services professionals can utilize marketing strategies in order to better understand their students and attract them to career services and to the many opportunities career services can provide for them.

A first marketing approach is to look at services currently being provided from the center. From a business standpoint, the objective of the service is to fill its students' needs profitably. An ideal marketing goal is to find out what the needs are, whether they are being met, and how to better meet them. Meeting student needs and staying competitive requires many different services. Therefore, service marketing does not just refer to the advertising and selling of services. It is the process of ensuring that the organization is meeting the needs of students (Rust, Zahorik, & Keiningham, 1996).

According to Rust, Zahorik, and Keiningham, "Any organization is more effective if everyone is working to accomplish the same goals" (p. 73). Goals must be developed and communicated to all employees. Communication is key (Sims, 2002). These can

be achieved through service strategy, which communicates to all employees and customers exactly what the organization is, what the organization does, and what the organization believes in. Service strategy also identifies the customers who will be served and the value they will receive. These strategies are also referred to as vision, mission, goals, and plans in many businesses (Rust, Zahorik, & Keiningham, 1996).

Marketing is an essential part of business operations. It oftentimes determines how successful the business will be. What a potential business owner must do is maintain a thorough understanding of the marketing program and use it to extract advantages from the marketplace (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2002). To help accomplish this goal, a marketing plan should include certain strategies.

The marketing approach/model that will be used in this paper is by Rust, Zahorik, and Keiningham (1996), and is outlined as follows:

Service Marketing Management:

Focus the organization

Attract customers

Listen to the customer

Measure customer satisfaction

Determine financial impacts

Improve goals

Look at the future

These tasks are listed in logical order from start to finish, although an ongoing organization would ideally do all these steps on a continuous basis. The first task is to

focus the organization, which involves figuring out the purpose of the organization, how it can compete for students, and what groups to target. The next task is to attract students. This might be accomplished through advertising, media, and providing workshops and fairs. The third task is to listen to students and determine what areas the career center should care about most. Once students are attracted to the service, their needs must be measured to ensure that they are being satisfied. If there are any concerns, these need to be reviewed, reflecting on the financial resources. The fifth task is determining financial impact, which means evaluating the return of the investment with time and money. The final two tasks are actually implementing the ideas and then looking at the big picture on how to address the concerns and meet future goals (Rust, Zahorik, & Keiningham, 1996).

Creating a Brand Identity

The way to promote services to students is to treat the brand (the service) like an asset. What is branding? Branding is not marketing; rather, it is the heart of the career center service. It involves strategic development, marketing plans and models career center services use. Brand identity is extremely important in helping students understand the end benefits they will derive from the proposed service -- both at the time they identify it and after they have experienced it. Brand identity should be viewed as a long-term asset for the entire organization (Terrill & Middlebrooks, 1999). Once the identity is successfully marketed to students, it will be easier to sell or market services to other students because a brand identity will have been created.

A common misunderstanding of branding is that it's a function of marketing. Marketing is an important tool used to promote the brand delivery. Brand identity of a

career center could include; services provided, mission, culture, and staff of the office.

A strong brand for a career center needs to be clear, consistent, and able to withstand the test of time. The ultimate purposes for branding are creating and extending the career center's image, as well as capturing and sustaining students' needs for the products and services (Sims, 2002).

Branding is a popular topic among employers, and effective branding for the career center depends on the same principles. Some ideas on how to build a career center's brand with employers are: Think of your career center as a product or service—its brand is its reputation. Identify whom you are trying to attract. Conduct research: "What does your target audience value? What are you currently offering? How well are you communicating your offerings? What else can or should you offer? Take action based on your research. Communicate your message consistently over time to your target audience. Measure your results and adjust if necessary. Build your center's brand by consistently delivering on your promise over time" (Spotlight Online, 2002, p. 2).

Media can help support branding and is very important for advertising to the public. There are many ways in which media can be used to enhance the image of career center offices, including getting the word out -- something that should be thought about right away. It is extremely useful for career fairs, resume workshops, or even a list of job-search tips. When the Career Center's name is in the news several things are accomplished: "You'll make your office and all the work you do more visible to administration, students, faculty, and staff. You'll get the attention of students and alumni who might not usually visit your office -- and some of them will demand your

services. You and your staff will become the "experts" that people -- your college community and the community beyond your college -- quote and turn to for help" (Allen, 1997, p. 54).

The image of career centers is very important to college campuses. Preissler (1994) said that once they improve their image, they become known around the university's constituencies for both their intent and accomplishments. They are also able to attract more interest to their services. Some of the steps Preissler took to improve image were the following: "(a) conceive a linking mission statement, (b) develop 2- and 5-year strategic plans, (c) report collaborative successes, (d) develop a logo and rallying theme, (e) establish give-and-take employer relationships, (f) join the academic enterprise by educating, and (g) initiate a strong communications program" (Preissler, 1994, pp. 32-34).

Understanding and Motivating Students

In the author's experience, college students sometimes have a tendency to place their career planning on the back burner until the last minute. They seem to like the fastest and easiest way in searching for a job. Some students even think that if they visit the career center they will automatically be placed in a job. This concept tends to get many students in trouble in seeking employment when they are in desperate need of a job.

Career centers need to understand their students better. There are two different types of students who attend college, traditional (current graduates from high school), and non-traditional (whose education has not followed the 'normal' progression of attending college directly after high school) (Plymouth State College, 2002). Career

Career centers need to research and get to know both types well. One example of understanding students could be to learn about Generation Y, the newest student generation to enter colleges and universities. Some of the characteristics of Generation Y are: they were born between 1980-1994, they grew up inundated with marketing messages, and they ignore or reject conventional advertising. Personal qualities that have been attributed to them include: optimistic, obsessed with achievement, accepting of racial difference, "techy," able to multitask, enjoy teamwork, want to make a lot of money, have specific goals for the next 5 years (90%), and have done volunteer work (75%) (Roth, 2002).

Accordingly, marketing to Generation Y may be different from marketing to other generations. They have been described as interested in what's "hot" at the moment, so career centers may need to build brands with students rather than for them.

Generation Y students have been described as ignoring telemarketing, internet, and mass mail. Career centers may need to be creative so they capture these students' attention. Market researchers have found that Generation Y students listen to: (1) Faculty, (2) Students/Peers, (3) Parents, (4) Student Services, and (5) Media (Roth, 2002).

Strategies for Improved Marketing

Student affairs professionals need to conduct research on marketing strategies for both recruiting and retaining students to their services. Another way to market services is by building relationships with good contacts, who are in a position to make a positive contribution to students' career search processes (Roth, 2002). For example,

good contacts can be developed with faculty, staff, parents, and alumni because they have the closest ties with students on campus.

The success of a career center can affect admissions and degree programs, can play a major role in alumni relations, and can have an active influence on community relations. Roth (2002) believes student affairs professionals are seeking ways to build bridges and collaborate with faculty and connect with the academic mission of their institutions. Many faculty members can see the connection between their classrooms and objectives of the career center office. Faculty in business schools often view career services as a strong way of building active relationships with the business community. Some liberal arts faculty have begun to appreciate that career center offices can help the faculty attract students to their programs and majors (Roth, 1994).

Marcia Harris, Director of The University Career Center at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, discussed marketing strategies in partnering with parents to promote the career center. Harris (2002) emphasized determining the goals, developing and implementing the plans, and assessing the results.

In the first step of determining the goals, it is necessary to determine why to market to parents. Harris suggests asking the question: "Do you want to market to parents in order to attract them as advocates, contacts/mentors for students, internship/job providers, donors, or recruiters?" In Harris' framework, parents are seen as natural allies (Harris, 2002).

In the second step of developing and implementing the plans, Harris suggests that Career Centers need to establish credibility. Examples could be educating parents about the mission, impressing them with the center's knowledge, services, and

resources, impressing them with the quality of the work of the center, and impressing them with results and testimonials. Harris recommends that career centers also involve parents with their needs by using them on their advisory boards and letting them know of future goals. Career centers need to stay in touch with parents by using every opportunity to communicate and being proactive about communication (Harris, 2002).

Harris' third step is to assess results yearly, including evaluating all sessions with parents (e.g., orientation, parents weekend). Harris suggests soliciting input from parents (e.g., through website, programs, advisory boards), soliciting feedback on unsuccessful funding proposals, benchmarking with peer institutions, and then finally assessing and refining the plan yearly (Harris, 2002).

Darwin Kysor, Director of Career Services at Juniata College, also presented ideas on marketing to students and parents. One is to bombard students and their parents about on-campus recruitment. In addition to posters, flyers, e-mail, and classroom presentations, another idea is to send out pre-holiday and spring break postcards to students' home addresses. This idea is intended to catch parents' attention before students return home and students' attention once they arrive at home. Mailings are an inexpensive and an effective way to generate increased traffic, since some students respond to parents' pressure (Spotlight Online, 2001).

Career services can be marketed to students by using low-cost attention-getters to motivate students to use the career center's services. For example, some career center staff give out free soda, snacks, or dried soup packets and attach a calendar of career services events, or hand out pencils that carry the center's web address and phone number (Spotlight Online, 2002).

Alumni are an important source of information regarding job opportunities. They can be helpful in giving students a confidence boost. Alumni can advise students about skills they acquired in college and how they use those skills in their jobs now. Alumni who graduated during the last recession that hit the economy have the credibility to give students advice on how to get through tough times (Spotlight Online, 2002).

Roth (1994) makes the point that career centers need to be involved in on-campus programs at all divisional levels of the college/university, both to increase their visibility and to ensure that their own perspectives are not lost. New student orientation is foremost among these programs -- incoming students not only learn the campus, its culture, and its academics, but also how their college experience will shape the rest of their lives. In addition, career centers can be involved in any form of first-year student programs or senior capstone seminar programs. Student affairs departments concerned with student activities, student clubs and organizations, and fraternities and sororities may find that career centers can offer a wealth of program ideas and supportive resources for programming in these areas (Roth, 1994).

Specific Events Career Services Can Market To Students

In this section, selected programs are described as examples of specific events some universities use as marketing strategies with their students. These events give additional strategies to possibly coordinate marketing recruitment activities on other campuses.

The University of Arizona

The Career Service Center at the University of Arizona involves students in a student-run Career Week. Students organize and market the event, the Career Service

Center sponsors and administers the event, and employers exhibit at and promote the event. The purpose of Arizona's Career Week is to educate the three groups involved: students, employers, and faculty. By broadening the job fair program to include key constituents in educational areas, they are able to reach the entire student body, first-year students through graduate students. Their goal is to show students the connection between their current academic and their future career experiences. The week also advertises tools the Career Center can provide through cooperative education and internship programs, as well as placement programs and job searches. Through this program, recruiters see themselves as purveyors of career information, not just as recruiters (Kelley & Kravinsky, 1992).

The Career Week at Arizona involves the whole university. The Career Center selects student coordinators who represent the colleges of arts and sciences, agriculture, business and public administration, and engineering; they place emphasis on minority recruitment. A Career Week committee, including faculty and student council presidents of the involved colleges, directs the entire program. Career Week is generally held the last week of September and is marketed only to students currently enrolled at the University (Kelley & Kravinsky, 1992).

The event the University of Arizona has been successful in marketing students to the Career Center. Not only are the students who are hired by the Career Center involved with Career Center activities, but they also help market services to their peers and students on campus. Students are key agents for becoming involved in the Career Center because they are prime candidates in speaking out on behalf of Career Center services.

Temple University

Temple University Career Services has designed ways to involve students in recruiting events. One example is creating a red and white vendor cart that can be set up virtually anywhere on campus. Instead of selling hot dogs or ice cream, it is used to sell services. The cart enables career services to hand out brochures, business-card-size reminders for career fairs, and freebies. Kathleen Gallagher, Associate Director of Career Development Services, explains that in order to promote on-campus recruiting it is crucial to get out of the office. Another idea used along with the vendor cart is to have Career Center professionals dress up in costumes that attract students' curiosity and interest to come and see what is in the cart.

Career seminars are also a popular idea at Temple University for many reasons. They're relatively easy to plan, should generate enough response to cover costs, and can reach a large number of people. Some workshop ideas could be "Real Life 501", addressing various aspects of life after graduation such as financial planning, insurance and investments, establishing a social life, professionalism, and workplace cultures (Oatis – Skinner & Betz, 1998). Career seminars can be used to market career services by having handouts for students to remind them of all the services that are provided to them from the Career Center.

Colorado State University

Colorado State University implemented the College Career Liaison (CCL) program, to combine the best of both centralized and decentralized approaches. A CCL is a career counselor who is dedicated to a specific college within the University. This program goes beyond the assignment of an existing counselor to work with

students from a selected college. Instead, liaison counselors serve as links between the University's Career Center and the counselors' respective colleges. Colorado State University has five colleges: Business, Liberal Arts, Natural Resources, Natural Sciences, and Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences (Kretovics, Cornell, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997). This marketing strategy creates close relationships in working with the faculty to gain support in each concentrated college, and also markets to students to use a more convenient location to visit a career counselor.

Use of Technology

Technology is arguably the single biggest change that career centers have experienced in the last 20-30 years. The roles technology plays in the office are the delivery of career services, source of information, and marketing tools. Technology provides the platform through which many programs can be delivered, such as First Place, SigiPlus, and Discover for students; it makes it possible for colleges and universities to manage vast amounts of information; and it allows colleges and universities to establish Internet websites with job search materials and connect with databases developed by others (Behrens & Gordon, 1997, pp. 36-39).

Another way technology can be a useful tool is to develop a better understanding of students and their use of career services. At Arizona State University, for example, when students attend a career center event, staff swipe their student ID card, which is issued by the university and used for a variety of purposes. The card swipe gives the center staff the student ID number. The staff then matches the student ID number to demographics already on record with the university, enabling the staff to develop a profile of students who attend events. The system complies fully with FERPA and other

privacy standards (Spotlight Online, 2002).

These data can then be used to market events to students. Staff can determine if they are under-serving a particular population and target that population, using e-mail and other direct marketing means to reach that target audience.

Conclusion

Successful businesses use marketing strategies to bring their products and services to the attention of customers, to understand customers, and to focus the organization. Today's career centers can adapt business marketing strategies in order to become more proactive, rather than reactive in their efforts to attract students and faculty to their services. It is crucial that Career centers keep up with marketing strategies as a way of better understanding their students and attracting them to use their services more often and efficiently.

There are many marketing strategies career centers can use. Faculty, staff, alumni, and parents are extremely important targets to which services can be marketed. If career centers gain their support, they can promote the career center to students as well. Creating a marketing plan and a brand identity is another part of the process to market students to the career center. Once the career center achieves this step, the next step is looking at certain marketing ideas that may fit their specific college goals. The use of technology is another crucial strategy that can help attract students to career centers. By sharing these ideas, other institutions may learn new strategies and resources that may help them face challenges and benefit students as well.

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